D&D Fiction
Oroon Rising, Part 1
by Ed Greenwood

Chapter 1: The Thing On The Throne

The pain was worse than ever. It crawled slowly through him, gnawing as it went.

So this is what it felt like to die.

A shudder seized Haedrath, setting the smooth metal curves of his limbs to clanking against the throne. Some of his organs danced, dipped and shuddered in their floating bowls, restless hoses whispering against the smooth-curved arms of the palely-flickering throne.

What rose in him now was sharper and more searing than anything he'd felt in long centuries of swords thrusts through him, limbs severed and burned, and spells biting. This was—must be—the end.

He was more gleaming machine than man now, and by his own hand, but though that transformation had been futile, Haedrath was no fool. He was a wizard of ancient years and no small power, who sat on his floating throne of sorcery, in his cavernous hall of spells, at the heart of his own tall-towered stronghold, with a staff that winked and glowed with more power than many guilds of wizards could collectively boast resting across his knees!

Resting? Nay, humming restlessly.

As impatient as its master and creator. Haedrath growled and tried to ignore the ravaging within him.

He was, he reminded himself rather grimly, used to pain. Not this pain, coiling and surging, rising ever-higher in him like a greedy flame, but …

He tried to ignore it, clutching his staff hard in his cold metal hands and staring past the bowls that held his own organs, at the gently-drifting, rebounding crystal spheres beyond.

Or rather, not at his restless swarm of scrying-spheres, but at the scenes glowing and moving within them.

Distant views of adventurers dying.

Many-fanged jaws bit down, screaming warriors toppled in their own fountaining blood, and frantic spells were shrieked in dying vain. Hulking beasts reached out ponderous talons to rend armor and sobbing wearers alike, as easily as a hungry man peels fruit.

They were going to fail. And die, every one of them.

They always did.

Haedrath had watched so many adventuring bands die. It gave him no satisfaction - if it ever had—and after so much carnage in the same tall, dark, endless chambers of Staelghast, it afforded little entertainment. Maps could be left, detailed notes of warning identifying the traps and their triggers and avoidances… but there were always the beasts, endless slithering and stalking torrents of them, and always the patient skeletal arms, rebuilding as the flickering wards renewed themselves, mocking aging wizards whose own spells failed.

Until they were reduced to watching, hope fading with their lifeblood. The adventurers weren't going to find the magic Haedrath needed, ached to have, was dying for lack of. Not soon enough for him, at least.

His lungs were laboring faster, now, as he stared into the globes, his breath beginning to rattle. Not soon enough, indeed.

He was very old, but now—quite suddenly—would not live to be a night older.

The end would come soon, his hoped-for immortality mockingly near, yet unreachably distant. The magics, legend whispered, were waiting in Staelghast yet unfound, the riven bones of adventurers piling up in its darkened rooms. Futility, all of it.

Working alone, he'd been able to replace his withered arms, his tremblingly-failing legs, and his shrinking and darkening organs. Several times over, most of them. Yet his brain and his spine could only be his, and nothing could stop the slow, soft ravagings of the passing years upon them. Wherefore Haedrath, old as he was, would in time perish as all men did, archmage or farmyard lout. As dead as six of the Nine Great Wizards were already. When he became the seventh fallen, only Brethniir and Kadreth would be left to outlive him.

"Outlive, bah," he husked, spewing spittle, his voice a hoarse and squeaking thing he barely recognized. "Outlasted by a lich and a Worm that Walks. The glorious victory theirs."

His sneer ended in a long, rattling cough that left him slumped and shaking against the high back of the throne he'd crafted so long ago, when his spells yet sizzled and shone, and…

Enough. Enough of long-agos, and remembered triumphs, towers falling and dragons tamed and the soft yieldings of - enough.

Glorious victory. How we wasted the last of our lives. Twisted, stunted, and ruined ourselves and our latter days, chasing immortality and throwing away the last of our mortal days to do so.

The pain was in his throat now, throbbing its slow, patient way up the back of his head. His next handful of rattling, faltering breaths would be his last.

Wherefore there was something he had to do, so the last of the Nine would not succeed after he died.

Haedrath lifted the staff for a trembling moment that was long enough to awaken its lightnings, and gasped over their crackling, pulsing end-to-end chasings, "Brethniir of the Brazen Tower, I curse you to the doom of everlasting failure. Kadreth Whitecloak, I curse you to the doom of everlasting failure."

And then, calmly, he spoke the ninefold Curse itself.

And broke his staff over his gleaming metal knee.

The wind of his last feeble breaths rattling in his throat, Haedrath the Matchless sank down into the sudden roar of unleashed lightnings, barely seeing his scrying crystals bursting around him in showers of white sparks. A few of them failed to explode, spinning away into the distance as if fear-ridden - but in their depths could be seen pillars toppling onto the heads of the adventurer-devouring monsters, vaulted ceilings cracking in many chambers of Staelghast, and the air in those distant chambers flaring into explosive brilliance, emptiness spewing stars that flashed and burned out, flashed and faded, flashed and spat sparks in all directions…

Staelghast rocked, fissures opening in walls and balconies and ceilings falling. Dust rose and monsters fell as Haedrath's magical chaos raged throughout, mirroring the devastation racing around his room, setting the very throne beneath him afire.

Blazing slowly, it sank slowly towards the smooth marble floor, as Haedrath stared at many crystal glimpses of destruction, his hands full of crumbling ash and raging flames, and gasped out, "It broke so easily! All that work, and it brohh . . ."

And then his head feel from his shoulders and rolled forward into crumbling collapse, the body beneath it sighing into dust and a clanging chaos of tumbling metal limbs.

By the time the throne shattered marble and started to thunder deep into the floor, its groaning heralding its own swift-coming collapse, it was entirely empty.

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